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SUBJECT: FRANCE: VISIT OF VENEZUELA COORDINATOR DEBORAH MCCARTHY

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: In October 6 meetings with WHA Venezuela Coordinator Deborah McCarthy, French MFA officials reiterated French opposition to a Venezuelan seat on the UN Security Council but judged it remained a distinct possibility. DAS-equivalent Michel Pinard argued that overall the Chavez Administration had made progress through its social programs and was addressing a South American need for self-assertion, more popular-based governments and reformed institutions. While the Chavez regime showed clear authoritarian tendencies, so far freedom of expression and electoral process were still largely protected. On Colombia, he shared McCarthy's skepticism concerning the latest FARC gesture for a humanitarian exchange of prisoners, while arguing that Uribe might be tempted to negotiate a peace agreement to assure his place as a key figure in Colombian history and that the U.S. should encourage him in that direction. On Bolivia, Mr. Pinard expressed his conviction that President Morales was in great need of international support to overcome sizable gaps in experience and that Europe and the U.S. had an obligation to provide him with alternatives to Chavez and Castro. END SUMMARY

¶12. (C) WHA Venezuela Coordinator Deborah McCarthy met October 6 with DAS-equivalent for South America Michel Pinard (Venezuela, Colombia, and Central America desk officers also attended), followed by separate meetings with MFA UN desk officer for Central and South America Nicolas Kassanidas and MFA officer Eric Wiart, who covers South American narcotics trafficking. Acting PolCouns and PolOff accompanied McCarthy.

Venezuela

¶13. (C) MFA DAS-equivalent Michel Pinard argued that political change in South America in general and in Venezuela was less of a deliberate swing to the left than the reflection of the gulf between the rich and poor and the inability of institutions run by elites to respond to the disenfranchised. Although the need for self-assertion vis-a-vis the U.S. was real, the pressing necessity was to take care of the poor and to reform existing political institutions. Pinard acknowledged that Chavez showed authoritarian tendencies but argued that they were still framed -- unlike the situation in Cuba -- by an electoral process with relatively free expression. Pinard expressed guarded optimism about Chavez's first steps toward institutional reform and opined that, despite obviously widespread corruption and opaque internal processes, Chavez's social programs had delivered "real results" for the poor, and Chavez had not thus far crossed any repressive red lines in consolidating his political

power. McCarthy noted that indeed the changes in the Hemisphere, particularly in the Andes were the result of the fracturing of institutions which had not been responsive to or representative of the wide body of citizens but noted that in Venezuela there was an increasing concentration of power in the executive. Pinard agreed with McCarthy that most of the Chavez Administration's social spending had involved direct transfers from soaring oil revenues rather than investment in education or other skills-building programs. Pinard agreed with McCarthy's emphasis on the importance of encouraging the development of a viable political opposition as a means of assuring democratic choice. McCarthy indicated that the USG had proposed to have exchanges in specific areas with the GOV (drugs, terrorism, commercial activities) but that the response had not been positive and was unlikely to be so until after the elections. She stressed the need for a strong international observation noting that EU participation would be very important.

¶4. (C) Pinard acknowledged readily that Venezuela would not be good for the UN Security Council and added that Chavez was taking stands that France could not support -- notably on Iran. He stated that the GOF was prepared to be clear and direct with the GOV regarding its candidacy. He indicated that the GOF was considering agreeing to a visit by FM Rosales as an opportunity for a frank conversation on developments in Venezuela.

¶5. (C) Kassianides repeated Pinard's line on Venezuela but added that France was "fairly worried" about the possibility of a Venezuela victory, based largely on the fact that the vote would be in secret and his assessment that many countries were likely to seize the opportunity to vote against U.S. and European preferences. Raising the possibility of an eventual third candidate, he opined that

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the United States and Europe would be best served by refraining from too much overt campaigning for their preferred choice. McCarthy noted that the USG was not discussing a third candidate and that, given the division in the GRULAC, the final result would depend on votes from other areas, notably Africa where France could use its influence.

¶6. (C) McCarthy reviewed USG concerns regarding the increased outflow of drugs through Venezuela and noted that while cooperation with the US on counterdrug efforts had declined, it appeared to be sustained with certain European countries. She also noted that the outflow was a major problem for Haiti and the Dominican Republic. She stated that the GOV was doing little to control the border with Colombia despite assertions to the contrary. Wiart noted that the border was impossible to control and that efforts were best concentrated on port and airport security. McCarthy noted that the USG had unspent funds for such programs but that the GOV was still not willing to sign the LOA required. Equipment purchased by the U.S. was not being used. Wiart listened intently to U.S. concerns about the easy accessibility of Venezuelan identity documents. McCarthy noted that GOV lack of concern was undermining efforts being made by the Hemisphere to tighten border security to protect the region from being used by terrorists. Venezuela's rapprochement with Iran was also of concern in this regard. She noted that repeated attempts by the USG to exchange information on the travel of SIAs remained unanswered.

Colombia

¶7. (C) McCarthy and Pinard addressed the latest FARC gesture for a humanitarian exchange of prisoners. Pinard noted the GOF's ongoing concern regarding Ms. Betancourt, and McCarthy noted that the USG had three hostages there as well. McCarthy warned that one of the first concessions the FARC would likely demand -- as had Colombian paramilitaries before them -- would be that the GOC desist from extraditing

people to the U.S., which would be unacceptable to the U.S. The FARC was also likely to be concerned about preserving its highly remunerative drug business independent of any military agreement. McCarthy noted that FARC intentions behind the proposal remained unclear and cautioned that the FARC remained convinced that it could continue the fight. McCarthy also reviewed USG policy on arms transfers to Venezuela in the context of the FARC, noting that there would be likely seepage/leakage of weapons into the hands of the FARC which would undermine President Uribe's efforts.

¶8. (C) Pinard speculated that Uribe could yet be tempted by a peace agreement "to assure his place in the pantheon of Colombian history." Pinard argued that the Colombian military might be growing tired of fighting, and he urged the U.S. to persuade Uribe to open negotiations for a peace agreement, which he said would be welcomed and praised internationally.

Venezuela's Impact on Neighbors - Bolivia, Cuba

¶9. (C) Pinard stated his conviction that Bolivian President Evo Morales had "good intentions" but was inexperienced and desperately in need of international guidance; it was important to provide Morales with alternatives to Chavez and Castro. McCarthy noted the early outreach made by the USG to Morales and continued ongoing bilateral dialogue, noting that Bolivia had not been designated as non-cooperating in the recent US certification process.

¶10. (C) In the case of Cuba, Mr. Pinard remarked on the apparent intimacy of the Castro/Chavez rapport, which he likened to a filial relationship. He expressed interest in receiving a USG a psychological assessment of the relationship between the two leaders. McCarthy noted Chavez's continued firm intent to support the Castro regime, opining that Chavez's ties were primarily to Castro and that it remained unclear what role/influence Chavez would play in the longer run in Cuba.

¶11. (C) Special Coordinator McCarthy cleared this report.

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